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June 13, 2003

JoAnne B. Barnhart, Commissioner
Social Security Administration
PO Box 17703
Baltimore, MD 21235-7703

Re: Response to Social Security Administration's Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on Criteria for Evaluating Mental Disorders -- 20 CFR Parts 404 and 416 (Federal Register March 17, 2003 (Volume 68, Number 51))

Dear Ms. Barnhart:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on proposed changes to the criteria for evaluating mental disorders for disability determination.

South Shore Mental Health is a private, non-profit comprehensive behavioral healthcare organization providing mental health and substance abuse services for people of all ages throughout Southeastern Massachusetts and Cape Cod. Our continuum of services includes outpatient counseling, medication, intensive outpatient programs, early intervention, day treatment, residential services, twenty-four hour emergency services, and crisis stabilization.

It is our firm belief that individuals with mental illnesses are entitled to a fair assessment of their disability status, based on current scientific data. Disability status, due to SSI and SSDI's direct link to Medicaid and Medicare eligibility, often proves to be the only way for individuals with mental illness and addiction to access needed care. It is essential that access to behavioral healthcare be preserved and enhanced where appropriate.

In particular, individuals for whom alcohol and/or drug abuse is their primary disability continue to have barriers to care as they do not qualify as eligible since the enactment of P.L. 104-121 which eliminated SSDI and SSI benefits for people with these disorders. In the absence of Congressional repeal of P.L. 104-21, increased access to benefits can be ensured by expanding Section 12.09 to include additional categories of allowable impairments which are prevalent disorders among clients served by substance abuse treatment programs.

The National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, of which South Shore Mental Health is a member, participated in a coalition of national organizations that reviewed the current rules and developed a set of suggestions. I urge you to support those recommendations to assure a fair assessment for individuals and access to appropriate behavioral health care.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harry Shulman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Harry Shulman
President/CEO